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SUBJECT: FRENCH IMPRESSIONS OF MORALES VISIT

REF: PARIS 104

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Presidential diplomatic advisor for the Americas Dominique Boche characterized the 45 minute meeting January 7 between President Jacques Chirac and Bolivian President-elect Evo Morales as positive. Morales reassured Chirac that foreign investors would be provided a secure legal environment in which to continue working in Bolivia, indicating that he did not wish to jeopardize current investment; in fact, more outside investment was necessary. Boche indicated that Morales provided similar assurances in meetings with France's employer's association MEDEF. (Note: French energy company Total has a 15 percent stake in two Bolivian gas fields, which are operated by the Brazilian firm Petrobras, the largest natural gas producer in Bolivia. End Note.) On the issue of coca cultivation, Morales explained to Chirac that permitting traditional coca use need not conflict with the fight against narco-trafficking.

2. (C) According to Boche, Morales did not offer any direct criticism of the U.S., but said that USAID funds were being conditioned to political requirements. Boche described Morales as a serious interlocutor -- "not at all like Chavez." In fact, Boche added, Morales had not mentioned either Chavez or Castro in the meeting, making a point to explain that he had his hands full with Bolivia and was not seeking to inject himself in complicated international issues.

3. (SBU) Following the meeting, Morales told reporters that Chirac had offered his "unconditional support and solidarity" and expressed his "admiration for the profound changes we are undertaking." Chirac did not participate in the press conference, but his office indicated that he was "very happy to see the first representative of an Indian nation assume the responsibilities of the president of Bolivia." Morales also spoke January 6 at the Latin American House in Paris, where he said that he sought national unity in Bolivia and would fight to end corruption in the impoverished country. Morales' singularity -- his indigenous roots, refusal to wear a tie, and most of all, his reputation as a leader ready to defy the U.S. -- endear him to many in the French media and garnered his visit extensive, in some cases adulatory, coverage.

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Hofmann